

Writers Aloud

Episode 401

RLF INTRODUCTION: Hello and welcome. You are listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London.

Hello and welcome to episode 401 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Lawrence Sail speaks with Ann Morgan about the importance of fallow periods, the difficult art of writing about and for people you know, the difference between a poem and a description, and being drunk on the power and enjoyment of words.

Ann Morgan: Lawrence Sail is a British writer and poet with a career spanning more than four decades. In addition to having published thirteen poetry collections and edited numerous anthologies he has been involved with many of the UK's most prestigious literary organizations, among them the Royal Society of Literature and the Arvon Foundation, which he chaired.

It was a pleasure for me to sit down with him in the basement kitchen of his Exeter home and hear about his work.

So Lawrence, where did writing start for you?

Lawrence Sail: Well, I suppose there are multiple answers to that, but I do remember a moment when I was about ten, when I was hiding under my mother's baby grand piano at home in Exeter, and for no particular reason at that point, it suddenly struck me that it would be possible to be completely, almost permanently drunk on the power of words and

Writers Aloud

the enjoyment of them. So I suppose in so far as I relate it to any given moment, that would be it.

Ann Morgan: Wow, 'drunk on the power of words', that's a wonderful way of looking at it! What was it about poetry that drew you, because you have written other things, but poetry is very much your *métier*.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. Again there are plenty of answers to that. I mean partly my education, doing French and German. I therefore had the excitement and the luxury of access to German poetry and French poetry and I think I was particularly attracted quite early on to French poetry, that build up of a wonderful vocalic hum, which is of course one of the reasons why French is so difficult to set to music.

Ann Morgan: And to sing, I have to say, having attempted to do so, it's not easy to sing French: the vowels!

Lawrence Sail: Exactly, all those mute 'E's, that seem to unmute themselves!

Ann Morgan: Yeah, absolutely.

Lawrence Sail: Yeah, even listening to something like Carmen, one's very aware of the operatic effect of that vowel structure. Well, poetry as 'memorable utterance', I suppose I belong to a generation too, that we had to learn quite a lot of poetry at school. The dreaded conning by rote of people like Masefield and Kipling and so on. And the junior school I was at, the headmaster, with a striking demonstration of either sadism or generosity, whichever way you look at it, decided that you would learn all 150 Psalms through the course of one year.

And of course, he had the most powerful weapon known as Psalm 119, which goes on forever. And he didn't tell us until we were halfway through Psalm 118 that 119 would be chopped into manageable sections. But that

Writers Aloud

learning by heart, it's very interesting in a sense, I haven't come back to it, but I find that things that are not necessarily written down, but you are evolving in your mind and in a sense are beginning to learn by heart have a different kind of weight to them.

Do you find that with your writing, that sometimes things lodge and hatch?

Ann Morgan: Yeah. I know what you mean, that there's something that will germinate over time. And yeah, reappear in a slightly altered form.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. And also in a slightly developed form, not necessarily the form that would've taken if you had rushed, it's a different kind of manoeuvre and a different kind of evolution sometimes I find. Increasingly, in fact, I find that keeping things in your head and having the confidence *not* to write them down immediately is an interesting way to work.

Ann Morgan: And your work spans four decades and it's very interesting reading through...there was a lovely retrospective that Bloodaxe books published, in 2010, I think.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, that's right, *Waking Dreams*.

Ann Morgan: Yes, *Waking Dreams*, and reading through the selections in that, seeing how the voice changes, but how certain concerns, certain ideas, reappear, it's very much what you're saying actually, you return...particularly the theme of time I think is something that you return to quite a bit in its different forms. From poems that are very technical in terms of the changing of the clocks, you know, the actual nuts and bolts of time, to wider-reaching ideas of what time is, how it affects our relationship with life and with others.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, absolutely. Someone once said in the glorious three-quarter truth, there are only three subjects for poetry: time, love, and

Writers Aloud

death. And of course the missing tetrarch is life. But yes, and of course it has to appear in various guises.

You can't nakedly just go on banging on about 'Time's wingèd chariot', but it's always there of course. It's very interesting, I think one effect of the Covid 19 business has been to make people reassess what is really valuable to them, and that is inevitably bound up with time, and I think that has brought perhaps a new attentiveness; certainly, we're very aware of time in the perspective of ecology and climate change and global warming. And, in fact, I think it's going to be very interesting to see what effect in the medium term that has on people's writing.

Ann Morgan: Absolutely, and the pandemic for many writers I know was a real watershed. Some people had to put aside projects because they felt entirely irrelevant or they couldn't see how on earth they could have any connection with them anymore. For you, did it change your approach to writing or connection to it?

Lawrence Sail: I don't know. I don't know because I have finished and published two books during the course of the last...just over a year, and I always find after that that what follows is fallow ground. Not the wasteland. I think fallow ground is actually very important. Do you find that too?

Ann Morgan: Absolutely. And I find often, because I'm quite a person who believes in discipline, probably slightly too much, I do force myself –

Lawrence Sail: – Join the club! –

Ann Morgan: – to keep writing and mostly what I produce during those times is...and then, you know, I'll produce rubbish for a lot of the time and then suddenly something will just — emerge.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, I quite agree. And it doesn't even have to be rubbish. In other words, I think it can be merely competent, but we all know when

Writers Aloud

we're on the song and when we're not. I mean, one of the things I find with writing poems is that it's always worthwhile to say to oneself or to ask oneself, where does this poem actually begin? You know, is there an umbilical that needs cutting? Am I taking a run up to it?

Ann Morgan: I think that it's clearing your throat.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, back to utterance of course, yeah, absolutely. But the looming question of course for all of us in a sense, is how do we change our lives in order to make some contribution? And what is the relation of our traditional or the traditional view of literature and writing, to what is going on? Are we talking about *accommodating* this in the endless flexibility of writing, or are we talking about putting down our pens and going outside? It's a very complex question, I think.

Ann Morgan: Do you have an answer to it?

Lawrence Sail: No, but it's closing in on me, that question. I'm particularly and increasingly haunted by the business of refugees and the absolutely appalling sight of children caught up in this terrible adult vortex. But of course, these things, I suppose part of the answer is that these things are not exclusive, we can write *and* protest, we can write *and* crowdfund, whatever, but our priorities are very sharply and clearly marked at the moment.

Ann Morgan: Yes. It has felt, the last few years, that these crises, one after another, a real pitch of anxiety and something quite difficult to know how to relate to actually. And I find with my work, that I need time to think about things.

There are brilliant things that get produced very quickly after the fact that you think, *wow, that's really captured that, or that's really caught that moment*. There's no way that I could do that. Most of my writing deals with things that have happened some time ago, or stories some way in the past. Is that similar for you?

Writers Aloud

Lawrence Sail: Very interesting. I find exactly the same and also that the immediate response, however well intentioned, may not have the reflective perspective that only comes with – we’re still talking about time, aren’t we! – that comes with the passage of time. But we live in an age, don’t we, where the instant view is what people are invited to come to as soon as an event happens, and I think it’s a big disadvantage.

Apart from anything else, we are all of us human beings who change our minds and change our perspectives and change our priorities. But I suppose also that there has to come a point at which you simply have to get on with it and decide, *well, yes, I have digested that*. I don’t know whether you’d agree, but it’s not something one can be entirely conscious and rational about, is it? You have to be aware of your own processes, but you can’t rationalize everything.

Ann Morgan: Yes, I think that’s right. But certainly if I tell myself I’m setting out to write a particular sort of thing or a particular character or particular...it dies. It’s flat on the page; it’s completely devoid of life. There has to be elasticity. I may have a sensation, a feeling, of what something will be, but it morphs and has to develop.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, exactly. And isn’t that part of the fun and part of the event and part of the difficulty all? Again, I find myself in complete agreement about that. It’s also that an entirely rational and flat approach is not only desiccated and possibly linguistically lifeless, but it actually doesn’t allow room for the unexpected.

I mean, that’s one of the things I find quite extraordinary with writing, that sometimes, for instance, a poem takes off and you think you know where it’s going, but, oh no, you don’t. It becomes something quite other. One hopes for better rather than for worse, but it’s sometimes goes a long way from that original impulse.

Ann Morgan: How do commissions and dedications fit with that, because

Writers Aloud

a number of your poems are written for particular people. If you are setting out to write something *for* someone, does that limit...because surely there must be a...I would worry that I would write something that might upset the person or that they may not like, if I knew I was writing it for someone. How does that filter in?

Lawrence Sail: Yes, good question. I think the most important thing with commissions is to always be upfront about the possibility of failure. A poem isn't good because it's a commissioned poem, although Auden rather nicely said, all poems are commissioned by their writers, which I rather like, self-commissioning. And a lot of the poems that you're talking about are indeed self-commissioned or perhaps written for the occasion of a birthday, and of course, what is a birthday poem about? Time. So it opens out, beyond the particular. I have in the last two years had a particular acute instance of exactly what you're talking about.

One of my oldest and closest friends who I was staying with, and I and his wife found him on his kitchen floor having had a very bad stroke. And since that time he's can't speak, he's incontinent, he can't stand and so on. This seemed quite impermissible to write about, but I did in the end, a year and a half later, it became important to write about him and indeed for him.

And that was extremely difficult to do because you have to be truthful, but there's no excuse for colonizing disaster when it's either personal or political. So I came up with a version, showed it to his family, and very rarely did alter things in the light of comments they made.

And he has had it read to him and apparently was very pleased. The other acute difficulty I can remember writing a poem, was a poem called 'Father to Son', which is about my son Matthew, who's now in the fourteenth year of his second kidney transplant. I wrote a poem in the wake of a particular, one of many hospital stays of his, in London at the Shaftsbury Hospital, which is now a smart, boutique hotel, and was originally a nunnery where

Writers Aloud

the penance of the nuns was to go up the stairs, plenty of them, on their knees, but I didn't publish that for, I don't know, fifteen years?

And again, I know Matthew prizes that poem. But these are difficult matters, and I think you just have to be as honest as you can about your motive and about your success in writing a poem about it. Not just describing it.

Ann Morgan: That's a very interesting distinction. Can we look into that a bit, what is the difference between a poem and a description?

Lawrence Sail: Well, a description...what a question to set me! A description, I think, is what it says on the tin: it's representative, it has no resonance. I mean, it's good in a sense that if it works, it won't pluck at the sleeve but then neither should a good poem pluck at the sleeve in the wrong way, and we're back to Keats here aren't we? Not having those sort of intentions on the reader. But I suppose I would characterize the difference as: breathing space, resonance and to a certain extent opening out from the particular into something, which may have a broader perspective.

Ann Morgan: So using the particular as a prism to look at a universal?

Lawrence Sail: Can be. He said warily. This is Blake, of course, isn't it, yes: Heaven in a wildflower and the world in a grain of sand.

Ann Morgan: There's actually a line from your poem, one of your early poems, 'On Porlock Beach', 'A drowning desire to sense the single in calm collectives', which seems to speak, to me, to this question a little bit, looking at groups or entities and yet seeing the individual in that and finding a way to connect to that.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, I think that is important to me. It's to a certain extent born of a desire for wholeness on one level. I remember going to Glastonbury for the first time and looking at the suggestiveness

Writers Aloud

of the *absent* sections of the arch, which the imagination completes. I suppose that's part of the answer to the difference between description and something more resonant. The imagination gets to work on absence as well as presence. And that has its own excitements. I mean, it just is an astonishing faculty, the imagination and seemingly endless. I think, I don't know whether you find this, are you aware of your creative energy as it were coming and going? Is it periodic?

Ann Morgan: Yes. I will often have a splurge and suddenly a number of things get written. It feels...I know at the time it isn't as easy as when I look back on it, it feels. But there's a sense of, even though the work is hard in the moment, I know what to do next. So it may be that there'll be some hours of wrestling with something, but the wrestling is to some purpose. Whereas I've done plenty of wrestling that leads to nothing tangible at the end of it, in non-creative stretches.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. The cutting room floor has quite a lot of material on it.

Ann Morgan: Absolutely.

Lawrence Sail: But that's good too, isn't it?

Ann Morgan: I think so, yeah, often it's working through ideas that may later reappear in another form.

Lawrence Sail: Don't you think, Ann, that all writers – I mean here's a sweeping generalization – but we all more or less have our particular obsessions, concerns, themes that we come back and back to. Do you find that?

Ann Morgan: Yes. It's only now at this stage that I'm starting to see that in my own work, because I suppose I'm building up enough things to look back on. But certainly in other writers work you can see that. It's

Writers Aloud

the interesting...the flip side of that, I suppose, and I think it particularly, I don't know how it is for poets, but it certainly is a problem for fiction writers, is that you get pigeonholed and required to write the same thing over and over again.

And, for me, that has caused some real periods of frustration and blockage actually, because I feel really disinclined to do that. So it's that balance between being free to return to certain concerns, but not being required to reproduce the same sort of thing.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. I think, interesting. Of course our freedom is circumscribed, not only by time, but by marketing departments.

Ann Morgan: Absolutely.

Lawrence Sail: And it's true, isn't it, it's this wretched business of people being treated as brands, I mean, it's one thing that I think poets on the whole are saved because it's so uncommercial except for very few people and that does bestow freedom of a kind.

Although you may end up doing as many bits-and-pieces jobs as you describe in your biography on your website. I suppose the end of it all, what I most want to emphasize is just the sheer – the feeling of real – excitement and delight at sometimes being able to do this thing and in all its phases, some of them much more glamorous than others and some gruelling and some cul-de-sac. For all that, it feels extraordinary to have been able to do that. You were talking about this terrible trail of forty years behind; I was a very late starter. We live in an age which, on the whole, encourages people to become a brand when they're very young.

The first thing I'd attempted to get published was when I was, I don't know, twenty-eight, twenty-nine. I sent in four poems to the *New Statesman*, and it was either Anthony Thwaite or James Fenton because I think they were together at the *New Statesman*. And then the two poems were seen by a publisher who said, 'got any more'? And that became the first book.

Writers Aloud

But the first book didn't go through any real critical filters and I don't think particularly well of it. But you know, as in so many other things in life, I don't think you can avoid any of the steps in the dance; they all perhaps have a contribution to make. And maybe that links up with what you were saying about the differences in the early work to the late work. But there are continuities too — he said defiantly. We've talked a bit about these obsessions: if I said to you, *what do you think are your obsessive things insofar as you...* you might not agree with that, but would you have an answer to that?

Ann Morgan: I often like to try and tell stories about people who you would cross the street to avoid and make people care about those people, or feel that they understand how that person's got to that situation.

That was certainly with *Beside Myself*, the main character in that. I thought if I saw her coming towards on the street, I would be probably a bit frightened and I think she's the sort of person that a lot of people would feel frightened meeting or make judgements about. And in fact, one of the scenes that means a lot to me in the novel is where she's in a bank and a number of rather judgemental comments are made to her by bystanders who witness her having a sort of meltdown.

I think for me, storytelling and imagining your way into someone else's experience, is a humane exercise in trying to encourage fellow feeling. You do similar things in a number of your poems, one that comes to mind again, it's from the early poems, and you'll have to forgive me because I can't remember the title, but it's the story of a child who drowns in a pond.

And you describe it from the child's viewpoint, the building up to this event, and then it happens. And it's never said in so many words exactly what happens, but we know because of the way you've prepared it, and we've seen it through that child's eye, how this event is almost irresistible. It's very interesting. So you do exactly the same thing in that sense.

Writers Aloud

Lawrence Sail: Yeah. Well you are making me feel also that yes, you are right, it's a matter of perspectives, but I wanted to go back to childhood. Really the poem you're talking about is all summed up in that word, 'no', it's the great 'no', isn't it, of the child growing up and defying the parents. But it's interesting to me, I'm fascinated by childhood as a thing, I was talking about child refugees earlier.

It's very interesting that many languages have two words, childish and childlike; *kindlich*, *kindisch*. One is a compliment, the other isn't, and I suppose, the most direct poem in that vein I've written — again, we talked earlier about how long it might take to digest things and before writing about them. This is a poem I wrote forty-five years after the experience that it evolves from.

When I was about five, I was sent away from home by my mother and her then boyfriend, because I inconveniently had recurring nightmares that woke them up. I was sent to this home, it's somewhere near here, near Exeter — he looked around as if it might be next door! — but it's somewhere in the country near here.

And when I wrote about it — just as you were saying with the other poem — I decided I would write with the full rhymes and the directness and the vocabulary of a small child. And that was the only way to tackle it. But it was very odd because suddenly there I was back in the present of this home where they tricked you: they had a big rocking horse in the hall and you were invited to ride it, and then of course your parents rode away again, as the poem says. So it's like a malign little fairy tale.

Ann Morgan: And what's neat at the end of that poem actually is that you imply, or you make us feel, that the memory of the rocking horse and the parents riding away replaces the recurrent nightmare that you were sent to get rid of.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, that's right it does, but at the same time of course, it remains a haunting. But forty-five years on, I thought, *well, I better show*

Writers Aloud

this to my mother so I did, and she was a very kind, cheerful person, but in this case, without any malign intention, she really said, ‘Yeah, I expect you feel better for that!’

I mean, what again, one of the points it seems to me of not necessarily that long a time lapse, but *a* time lapse, between an emotionally powerful and in some ways dislocating experience and writing about it, is that you do approach it not as therapy, but as art. And you have in that sense, a palpable design upon the reader.

Ann Morgan: Yes, emotion recollected in tranquillity, I suppose. It’s interesting that childhood is something that you’re so gripped by, and you can tell that’s actually in a way because your memoir *Sift*, an account of your childhood in Exeter, is a beautifully compelling and evocative book.

What I found really interesting reading it, so many of the details I enjoyed so much and it was so funny as well, really funny. But what I found very interesting was that it describes what feels like a very urban childhood and yet nature is such a huge theme and certainly your early poetry...well, a lot of the early poems are set in the natural world in different ways: a trout hatchery, a lake, the beach, the beach recurs a huge amount, the sea. But and I was just wondering about that. How does that work?

Lawrence Sail: Well, firstly it’s not just the early poems. A lot of the later poems are about...

Ann Morgan: That’s true as well.

Lawrence Sail: Well, ‘Smoke Tree’, ‘In my Garden’, they’re about individual plants and flowers and to a certain extent these mirror without consciously setting out to do so, my father’s preoccupations, he was a painter and I only ever saw him about a dozen times.

Ann Morgan: Once walking on his hands.

Writers Aloud

Lawrence Sail: Once indeed, and the coins falling out of his pocket! Yeah. But he never talked about anything to do with writing or painting, very sadly, I think now. But of course, by circumstance we both ended up in a household of three. He with my half-sister and his second wife, I with my twin and mother. And so on the very rare occasions we met, we fell on each other's necks and went drinking or chatting.

But he's always been a commanding absence. And the parabola of his work is that his best work, I think, was done in the thirties, when he and my mother were travelling in Europe, but they spent a lot of time on the Adriatic coast and settled in Spain. And then had to leave because of the Civil War and his later work homes more and more to plants and flowers, and he's always obsessed by particularly things like sisal; a lot of his paintings are these giant, rather threatening sisal plants and so on. And of course I share with him a love of the sea. But yes, I've never...I mean, I'm a Londoner by birth and perhaps when I was a small child, I didn't like living in Exeter, I couldn't wait to get back to London because that after all was where theatre matinees happened, and grandparents, and tea from thick China pots in the interval of the pantomime, and so on. But when it came to bringing up children of my own when we came back from Kenya, the Southwest just seemed *wonderful*, but I'm not conscious particularly of being urban or rural.

I would say that the perhaps dominant third term is something you've already mentioned, which is the shore, the sea. My idea of heaven is being in a small sailing boat and also the sea just is an extraordinary presence and an extraordinary thing in itself: it's protean; it's inconstant, endlessly fascinating.

And of course that too has now acquired a rather grimmer dimension in terms of what we've done to the sea and the shore, and the seabed and its creatures. So I suppose if I was asked to put in order of preference, sea, countryside, city, that in fact would be the order.

Writers Aloud

Ann Morgan: Poetry in recent years has been going through what feels like quite a renaissance, actually I think, it's become cool again. A new generation seems to have discovered it, and all sorts of things are happening with social media platforms, et cetera, et cetera. Over the course of your career, you must have seen it wax and wane at various points. How do you feel about the house of poetry at the moment? What would you like to see in years to come?

Lawrence Sail: You are right about the waxing and waning, in fact renaissance is declared on the whole between once every five or ten years. And that's fine in the sense that it gives a good spark and ignition to a new generation. And I think that's entirely good. And the other *huge* change, of course, is that it is no longer English poetry, it's poetry in English, and all the Englishes that we have learned to accommodate... I think one of the saddest things about poetry as it used to be was, it was said that...I mean, there's the famous Adrian Mitchell dictum isn't there, 'most people ignore poetry, because poetry ignores most people' and it was also said that rather like antique dealers, you know, ninety-five percent of the activity was between traders and didn't involve the general public!

But it's a very interesting question. There was a time when you wonder whether poetry had retreated into the difficult and obscure, and whether this wasn't essentially defensive and a loss of nerve. On the other hand, that argument about the difficulty of poetry being desirable or not desirable, again, is endless and my feeling is it's a great shame, particularly in the miniverse of poetry, it's a great shame that people are so factional. There's surely room, there are many mansions in the house of poetry and there's room for everything. There's *wonderful* development of all poetry and rapping and so on, and slams and all the rest. But then some of the practitioners of those kinds of poetry are disappointed when critics get at them if they're published on the page and they look a bit thin. Of course they do!

Or they don't look right, of course not! — because they're not operating

Writers Aloud

in their home medium. And I think, we should rejoice at them *all*. And so going to the second part of your question, I think it's got to be, the best that you can manage of its kind. I mean, here's a moralizing word: it's got to have integrity, and I think I mean that in its original sense of *wholeness*.

A good poet always takes you into a world, a whole world, and I think that is beyond price. Time will judge whether you've had an important contribution to make. Most writers at their death are celebrated then ignored; very few taken up again. Some, rather like Mendelssohn rediscovering Bach, suddenly come to light and are celebrated, but they're all, at best, invigorating, joyous signs of human imaginative endeavour.

✧

RLF Outro: That was Lawrence Sail in conversation with Ann Morgan. You can find out more about Lawrence on the RLF website. And that concludes episode 401, which was recorded and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up in episode 402, Lucy Flannery owns up to an obsession with stationery, and Alexandra Benedict shares how she brings the senses into writing. We hope you'll join us.

You've been listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London. To subscribe to podcasts and to find out more about the work of the RLF please visit our website at www.rlf.org.uk.

Thanks for listening.